

Savan Charrette Looks for Solutions to Neighborhood Problems

BY JAMES GARDNER — JULY 16, 2015



[1]The end of a four-day charrette aimed at revitalizing the Savan and Downstreet areas on St. Thomas focused on generating solutions to issues ranging from crime to economic development, but residents at the final meeting Thursday night were more concerned about abandoned houses, noise from bars and loiterers in the neighborhood.

The meetings were hosted by the Economic Development Authority's Enterprise and Commercial Zone Commission and brought together a panel of speakers that talked about tourism opportunities, bringing in money for new businesses and making the neighborhood more active.

In response to questions from moderator Nadine Marchena Kean about what else is needed to revitalize the area, residents spent more than an hour talking about Savan's bar scene and were split on whether the bars were actually a problem or whether they just needed to lower the music, resulting in a back and forth about the pros and cons.

Some residents said the bars bring in jobs and just needed to be a bit quieter in the early morning hours so neighbors could "get some sleep." Others, however, said the bars increase the amount of loiterers on the corners, contribute to the trash in the area and should be restricted to one part of Savan instead of scattered all over.

Iffat Walker, president of the Community Action NOW! group that organized a three-week Savan cleanup and restoration effort said that most of the trash her volunteers have picked up in the last week have been beer bottles, cans or caps. Her co-chairman, Kevin Gilbertson, said the state of the bars and other areas deter investors that one panelist said could move in and encouraged to rehab some of buildings in the neighborhood.

Another resident, Ebonique Jacobs-Esprit, suggested that tearing down or completely renovating some of the buildings might be the best solution so that new businesses can come in and raise the value of the neighborhood.

Kean, however, said that federal laws on historic neighborhoods prevent the government from destroying the buildings or even taking them by eminent domain.

A heated exchange between Kean and resident Carol Lotz-Felix followed after Lotz-Felix said many of the abandoned buildings are owned by prominent families that let them fall into disrepair. The government doesn't step in and force them to improve the properties or sell them, she said.

Kean said the Enterprise Zone Commission is not responsible for prosecuting the building owners but that she has tried to bring in officials to see the state of the neighborhood and change the law so that the agency could have more power to act.

Only a few residents spoke about what they would like to see in the neighborhood, including Raheem Smith, a fourth-generation Savanero, who said adding a pharmacy would help residents.

Walker said adding more local stores, like a hat shop or pastry shop, would be more welcoming, while Department of Tourism Film Office Director Luana Wheatley said that historical walking tours and craft demonstrations could be a good draw for the area.

The input provided by residents during the charrette will be put toward developing a comprehensive development plan for the area, which will also be put out for public review.

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